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Language, Violence, and the State: Writing Tamil Dalits

Nathaniel Roberts

Review based on:

Viswanathan, S. (2005) *Dalits in Dravidian Land:* Frontline *Reports on Anti-Dalit Violence in Tamil Nadu*, Forward by N. Ram, Introduction by Ravikumar, Chennai: Navayana, 318 pages + xxxviii

[*cited as DLL*]

Thirumaavalavan, Thol. (2003) *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation*, Translated from the Tamil by Meena Kandasamy, Introduction by Gail Omvedt, Kolkata: Samya, 185 pages + xxviii

[*cited as TAL*]

Thirumaavalavan, Thol. (2004) *Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers*, Translated from the Tamil by Meena Kandasamy, Forward by Ram Puniyani, Kolkata: Samya, 248 pages + xxvi

[*cited as UH*]

Ravikumar (2009) *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics*, Translated from the Tamil by R. Azhagarasan, Forward by Susie Tharu, Kolkata: Samya, 298 pages + xxii

[*cited as VT*]

[1] With the Dalit movement in Maharastra having grown stagnant, and Uttar Pradesh's Dalit-led Bahujan Samaj Party possibly reaching the limits of its potential development, the vital forefront of Dalit politics has now shifted to Tamil Nadu. So writes Gail Omvedt in her introduction to Thol. Thirumavalan's *Talisman*.[1] Whether the recent upsurge of intellectual and political energy among Tamil Dalits shall indeed prove a model for Dalits elsewhere in India—or whether, on the contrary, there are not still more promising movements already afoot in the Dalit hamlets and urban slums of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, or other places yet unknown—is impossible to say. What is a good bit more certain, however, is that for the ferment in Tamil Nadu to succeed it must be translatable. This 'translation' cannot be limited simply to the translation of words. On the contrary, its translation must involve not only the translation of one language into another, but also of words into *deeds* at the national level—into policies that protect Dalits from violent atrocities not merely under law but also in fact, into substantive and not merely formal democracy, or into genuine land reform, to name but a few demands of Tamil Dalits. But before a demand can be implemented, or the argument found persuasive, it must not only be spoken but also heard. It must be taken up, it must be transcribed, translated, repeated, and repeatedly tested in political and intellectual contests. The demand that is spoken but once, or in a single place, fades on the wind. Similarly, when a laborer is beaten to death, or a Dalit hamlet [*cēṟi*] burnt to the ground, it only becomes an 'atrocity' [*vaṉkoṭumai*] when it is recorded as such, and subjected thereby to universal standards of justice. Insofar as these events remain within an entirely local context, the murderous beating remains a 'just punishment' [*tarma aṭi*], and the burning of Dalit huts, a restoration of the village order [*ūr āṭci*].

[2] The essence of the Dalit struggle, on the other hand, consists precisely in challenging this localization. What happens to Dalits in one particular village is no longer allowed to stay within that village, but is made known to Dalits throughout the state and, equally importantly, is fashioned as a challenge to extra-local authorities to uphold justice. But as all four books under review attest, extra-local authorities (in this case the Government of Tamil Nadu and its ruling Dravidian parties) have not only failed to meet this challenge but, on the contrary, have joined actively with the dominant castes in violently suppressing Dalits. These volumes, only

[1] Although Samya, the publisher of Thirumavalavan's two translated volumes, has chosen to spell his name with a double 'a' following the letter 'm' ['Thirum*aa*valavan'], in this review I follow the more common spelling, 'Thirumavalavan,' the spelling he himself uses (Gowthama Sannah, *Viṭutalai Cirutaikaḷ Kaṭci* party spokesman; personal communication).

three of which are translations in the literal sense, respond to this state of affairs by reaching beyond the state of Tamil Nadu and by posing the problems of Tamil Dalits as a matter of fundamental human rights. The impulse to translate local struggles into universal claims, in other words, is an inherent feature of Dalit politics and not merely an additional step. The publications discussed below are not, therefore, merely a documentary record of events and writings—they are themselves the very life of the movement.

[3] The themes of translation and the confrontation between local and universal political moralities introduce this review because one of the most frequent charges against the Tamil Dalit movement in recent years has been that it has increasingly retreated from Ambedkarian universalism into a parochial Tamil-centric linguistic cultural nationalism. In making these charges, critics refer in particular to the *Viṭutalai Cirutaikaḷ Kaṭci* ('Liberation Panthers,' henceforth VCK) under Thol. Thirumavalan's leadership. Yet although Thirumavalan does indeed affirm 'Tamil,' a careful reading of his speeches and writings—along with the political and intellectual context Viswanathan's and Ravikumar's contributions provide—reveals a complex negotiation between local and universal languages, and a transformation of terms that does not at all support these accusations. To grasp the significance of Thirumavalavan's and Ravikumar's interventions in Tamil intellectual and political life, I begin this review with a book that is not a translation, but which delineates the singular predicament of Tamil Dalits at the close of the twentieth century.

[4] *Dalits in Dravidian Land* is, as its subtitle tells us, a collection of fifty-two 'reports on anti-dalit violence' by investigative journalist S. Viswanathan, originally published in the fortnightly newsmagazine *Frontline* over the ten-year period from 1995 to 2004. The majority of the reports describe acts of physical violence, which in Tamil Nadu have all too often been perpetrated upon Dalits by the authorized agents of the state—primarily the police—in addition to the usual dominant (BC) caste groups.[2] Indeed, given the caste composition of Tamil Nadu's police force, and its active support of the castes that dominate among its ranks (i.e. BCs) against Dalits, the distinction between caste- and state sponsored-violence against Dalits is of uncertain theoretical relevance.

[2] On police violence, see especially chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 24, 30 and 35 'Terror in Uniform,' 'The Caste of Khaki,' 'The Importance of Karanai,' 'Killing Spree,' 'Police Held Guilty,' 'Mayhem in Gundupatti,' 'A Contentious Report,' 'Blaming the Victims,' and 'Police in the Dock.' Another aspect of police violence against Dalits, which is not well covered in this volume (but see chapter 1, 'Taken to Task'), is jailhouse torture and custodial rape. By contrast, these more quotidian aspects of police violence are amply described and documented in the writings of Thirumavalavan and Ravikumar.

[5] This uncertainty is deepened when we expand our optic to include, not just acts of violence in the sense of bodily harm and attacks on property, but also the various forms of structural violence Viswanathan documents, including what we might call 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1999). Structural violence includes the social practices outlawed under India's constitutional set up, but which nevertheless persist in Tamil Nadu with full knowledge of the state, such as Dalits being coerced into various forms of 'traditional' unpaid labor, or denied access to ostensibly 'public' resources like water, roads, and temples;[3] elected offices being 'auctioned' by caste councils;[4] Dalits being physically prevented from voting as they choose, being forbidden to run for elected office, or being prevented from actually assuming office when elected.[5] While the continuation of the foregoing practices involves the state only negatively—viz., by its failure to stop them from occurring—in other instances the state has been more directly responsible for structural violence against Dalits, for instance by suppressing non-violent Dalit political expression;[6] by refusing to implement reservations policies to the extent that a large portion of positions set aside for Dalits remain permanently vacant (while apparently never failing to fill the much larger number of positions reserved in the state of Tamil Nadu for the members of various politically powerful BC caste groups); by conniving in the subversion of land reform and indeed by practicing what Viswanathan terms 'land reforms in reverse.'[7]

[6] But for the purposes of this review perhaps the most important form of structural violence against Dalits is epistemic—pertaining, that is, to the production of knowledge (or its absence) on the condition of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. This includes, for example, the pervasive failure by police and other responsible bodies to collect vital information about reservations, attacks on Dalits, non-enforcement of Constitutional mandates concerning access to public spaces and other resources including temples. Thus, for example, while it is well-known that a huge backlog of positions reserved for SC/STs in government employment are simply never filled, it is impossible to determine the precise magnitude of the problem. For as Viswanathan explains, 36 of 141 government departments have simply declined to provide the relevant data, including

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[3] See, for example, *DDL* chapters 4 and 44.

[4] *DDL*, chapter 33.

[5] *DDL*, chapters 22, 29 or 36.

[6] *DDL*, chapter 13. On state suppression of Dalit political activism, see also: Human Rights Watch (1999) and Gorringe (2005).

[7] *DDL*, chapter 24; also, *UH* pp. 211ff. On the lackadaisical attitude of the Dravidian parties to land reforms more generally, see Sathyamurthy (1977), Washbrook (1989); for a contemporary assessment, explaining the retrogressive character of Tamil Nadu's land reform policies in comparison to neighboring states like Kerala and Karnataka, see Thangaraj (2003).

the Department of Education and other educational institutions, which together account for nearly 50% of all government jobs (*DDL*: 154).

[7] Nor is it possible to gain any clear picture of the extent of violence against Dalits in the state's predominantly rural society. For despite India's SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, which is designed to provide Dalits special protection against hate crimes, police have proven highly reluctant to register cases against perpetrators.[8] Thus even assuming Dalit victims gather the courage to report abuses by locally powerful caste groups, their complaints are frequently suppressed; official records thus grossly underestimate the problem.[9] The non-registration of cases under the Atrocities Act, however, merely continues a long-standing police practice of delaying and even outright refusing to file 'first information reports' (FIRs) in cases of attacks on Dalits, while vigorously pursuing false cases foisted upon them by village oppressors.[10]

[8] Moreover, official government commissions have routinely been used to issue false or misleading reports even in cases where attacks are recorded. When the scale of caste violence is such as to force itself upon public attention, it has become commonplace in Tamil Nadu for the state government to appoint a special judicial commission to investigate. By appointing such commissions, the ruling party is able to circumvent the State Human Rights Commission, which is thereby prevented from conducting its own investigation (Human Rights Watch 1999: 124–126). The reports of these special commissions can generally be relied upon to show the state and its ruling party in a good light, and reports that do not are rarely made public (Human Rights Watch 1999: *ibid*). One glaring example discussed by Viswanathan is the so-called Mohan Commission, appointed in the wake of an event in which police were alleged to have driven protesting tea plantation workers into the Tamirapalani river (Tirunelveli) with lathis, causing the drowning death of seventeen persons. In preparing his report, Justice S. Mohan simply excluded video taped evidence of police officers actually beating drowning men and preventing them from reaching the shore, and then contradicted what the excluded evidence clearly showed, announcing that 'The death of the people who fell into the river is only an accident; the police did not beat them while they were swimming' (*TAL*: 78). When activists

[8] On this point, see Human Rights Watch (1999), and *Uproot Hindutva*, pp. 132–3.

[9] See *Venomous Touch* chapters 21, 29, 31, 36: 'On the Borderlines: Dalit Rights versus Human Rights,' 'Caste Clashes and Aftershocks,' 'Rule of Law,' 'Research and the Armed Forces.'

[10] See Human Rights Watch (1999), and *Venomous Touch*, chapters 21, 28, 31: 'On the Borderlines: Dalit Rights versus Human Rights,' 'Dalits and Parliamentary Democracy: A Report on the Chidambaram Poll Violence,' and 'Rule of Law.'

attempted to publicly screen a documentary film in Chennai containing footage that disproved the official version of events, the DMK government swiftly suppressed the screening.[11]

[9] Thus one of the key questions that is posed, both explicitly or implicitly, in all four volumes under review concerns the nature of the state itself and its relation to society. As a secular, constitutional democracy, the state is formally distinct from the society it governs and the various particular identities of its citizens; police and administrative bureaucracies are putatively governed by a form of rationality that renders the 'private' social characteristics of its offices holders—their caste status for instance—irrelevant. Weberian assumptions such as these, and currently popular political theoretic models that continue to take the 'rational' character of bureaucracy as their starting point require rethinking if the arguments and examples put forth in these volumes are taken seriously.

[10] What the authors argue is not that the state cannot be distinct from the society it governs—on the contrary, that the state might be distinct from and in some senses antagonistic to the existing social order is not just a theoretical claim for these authors, but *a political goal to which they are all committed*. Their claim, rather, is that in the particular case of India, the state has shown itself to be largely an extension of (caste) society rather than being distinct from it. And this is especially true of Tamil Nadu where, as Ravikumar writes in the forward to Viswanathan's book:

> The police... have become mercenaries of caste Hindus. In Tamil Nadu, such a state of affairs became obvious after the DMK came to power in 1967... [W]hen antidalit violence was unleashed in Kilvenmani (1968),[12] Villupuram (1978), Kodiyankulam (1995),[13] Melavalavu (1997),[14] Gundupatti (1998)[15] and Thamiraparani (1999),[16] the police abetted the crimes as perpetrators. Both the AIADMK and DMK have been united in the unleashing of violence on dalits. (*DDL*: xxvi)

[11] Ravikumar's focus on the post-1967 period is not accidental. For prior to Dravidian rule, according to Ravikumar, the Brahmin-dominated Congress party could at least be

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[11] On the drowning incident itself, see *DDL* chapters 19–21; on the Mohan report and cover-up, see *DDL* chapters 23 and 30. See also *DDL* chapter 25 on another government report exonerating the police force for a highly-organized attack by 600 of its members on the Dalit hamlet of Kodiyankulam; the Kodiyankulam attack itself is described in *DDL* chapter 2, 'Terror in Uniform.' The Mohan Commission report is also discussed *VT* ch. 15, 'Judicial Terrorism,' and in *TAL* chs. 8 and 12, 'Police Terrorism' and 'Judgements.'

[12] *DDL*, p. 29 n.5.

[13] *DDL* chapter 2.

[14] *DDL* chapter 11.

[15] *DDL* chapter 12.

[16] *DDL* chapter 19.

counted upon to protect Dalits from BC caste aggression (*DDL*: xxvi). Since coming to power, however, the distinction between state and BC aggression has been substantively collapsed.

[12] Let us pause to absorb this claim. It is not that Ravikumar or any of the other authors under review are nostalgic for the days of Brahmin rule. On the contrary, a common complaint of Dalit leaders like Thirumavalavan and Ravikumar is that where they themselves have remained consistently opposed to Brahminical institutions, the heads of both Dravidian parties have long since come to embrace Brahminical Hinduism both in public and private (*UH*: 5, Rajendran 2001). And yet Thirumavalan and Ravikumar also recognize that opposition to Brahmins and to Brahminism does not automatically entail attacking caste privilege as such. Thus although Dravidian leaders were, at one time, undoubtedly sincere in their opposition to Brahmins, they failed to interrogate fundamentally the agrarian basis of caste domination, in which landed non-Brahmin castes were every bit as antagonistic to Dalits interests as their Brahmin rivals. And from the 1960s onward, the Dravidian parties unabashedly courted the powerful and populous BC castes, who were at once Dalits' most immediate oppressors and the foundation of the Dravidian parties' social and political dominance in rural Tamil Nadu.[17]

[13] That 'Dravidian land' is no sanctuary for Dalits is well understood by those with close ties to Tamil Dalits, or who know the details of the state's political history (Roberts 2007). But until recently at least, the prevailing assumption outside of Tamil Nadu has been that the allegedly anti-caste Dravidian movement (also known as the non-Brahmin movement) had entailed Dalit uplift in some fundamental sense. Thus Gail Omvedt, a respected authority on Dalit issues, expresses surprise at the lamentable condition of Dalits in Tamil Nadu: 'Why has Tamil Nadu, once so apparently progressive in its... anti-caste movements, *become today* the scene of such great violence against Dalits?' (*TAL*: xix, emphasis added). Omvedt's question is a good one, but in phrasing it this way she appears to assume that there is something fundamentally *new* in the recent spate of anti-Dalit violence. It is therefore worth asking what exactly is different about the situation today, as compared to, say, the beginning of the twentieth century or earlier. Of the various forms of violence described in the four volumes under review, none are new—routine beatings, murder, ritual humiliation and torture in response to individual acts of

[17] The Dravidian parties never included Dalits in any significant numbers in decision-making positions. Nevertheless a palpable shift occurred in the 1960s, when party leaders began actively to court BCs at the expense of Dalits and to suppress any vestiges of agrarian or class radicalism that would threaten the parties' non-Brahmin financial backers who were of landed and merchant caste background (Barnett 1976, Sathyamurthy 1977, Washbrook 1989, de Wit 1996: 64–96).

insubordination or infringements of ritual proscriptions; social and economic boycotts; and vigilante raids involving the destruction of Dalit homes and property, looting, and arson attacks on their hamlets in response to collective (as well as individual) insubordination. All of these are well-attested in the historical record, and, far from being recent innovations, comprise the traditional arsenal of tactics for the perpetuation of caste society's dominance over Dalits (Viswanath 2006). Nor is there any evidence of their being used more regularly, or more readily, in recent times; we simply do not possess the data that would allow us to make diachronic comparisons of this type.

[14] What is new to the mid 1990s, rather, has been the particular *form* of insubordination to which these acts of violence are a predictable response: namely, it has only been in this period that Dalits have begun to assert themselves in the electoral sphere, by mounting credible independent challenges to the authorized candidates of the dominant parties,[18] and by independently contesting panchayat elections.[19] Would a Dalit challenge to Dravidian electoral hegemony have been tolerated in earlier decades any more than it was in the 1990s? We cannot say. Therefore rather than describing the anti-Dalit violence of this decade as 'increasing intolerance of dalit assertiveness' (*DDL*: 79), it would be more accurate to describe the 1990s simply as a decade of increasingly vigorous Dalit assertion.

[15] Niceties of historical epistemology aside, Viswanathan's reportage on the situation of Dalits in Dravidian land is essential reading for any student of caste politics. Although it comprises previously published work, the volume exceeds the sum of its parts. For what may be somewhat difficult for the casual reader to grasp is the extent to which the information contained in Viswanathan's reports, although now a matter of public record, could nevertheless remain largely unknown. To understand how this could be, one must first understand how exceptional Viswanathan's work is and the extent to which, apart from him, the significant features of anti-Dalit violence have been either underreported, reported in ways that distort by omitting critical content, or ignored entirely.[20] Thus to cite just one example Viswanthan himself provides of the prevailing state of journalism in Tamil Nadu: 'On 23 April 1994, a contingent of 400 policemen supervised the bulldozing of sixty-three [Dalit] huts. All this merited [was] a few centimetres in one newspaper' (*DDL*: 31). In highlighting what others have habitually ignored,

[18] Previously Dalits who ran for office in independent constituencies were limited to those chosen to do so by Brahmin and non-Brahmin lead parties (DMK, AIADMK, Congress, etc.)

[19] Panchayats were only included with the rotating system of reserved constituencies in 1996.

[20] On the prevailing silence on Dalit issues in Indian journalism, see also: Ravikumar, 'Unwritten Writing: Dalits and the Media' (*VT*: 15–33), and N. Ram 'Forward' (*DDL*: vi–vii.

Viswanathan not only sheds light on the multiple dimensions of anti-Dalit violence in Tamil Nadu, but begins to reverse the epistemic violence that has rendered anti-Dalit crimes largely invisible to all but their most immediate victims.

[16] Thol. Thirumavalavan is the leader of the VCK, Tamil Nadu's most successful Dalit political party. *Uproot Hindutva* is a collection of 17 of his speeches, delivered between April 1998 and November 2004; *Talisman* comprises 34 articles written by Thirumavalavan for the Tamil edition of *India Today*, a weekly newsmagazine, between August 2001 and February 2003. In translating his words into English, Meena Kandasamy has made them available for the first time—not just to non-Tamil speakers from the West, but more significantly to Dalits from elsewhere in India. For an oft-overlooked feature of Dalit politics in India is the extent to which Dalits from different linguistic regions remain largely cut off from one another, and for whom English remains the only viable lingua franca. For although relatively few Tamil Dalits read English, fewer still read or write in Hindi or other Indian vernaculars. The reverse is also true: although only a minority of Dalits from the Hindi-belt have access to English, their numbers far exceed those who can understand Tamil.

[17] This returns us to the theme with which this review began, the meaning and significance of translation itself, and to the question of Thirumavalan and the VCK's increasingly pro-Tamil rhetoric. This turn to Tamil has been criticized on two grounds: first, that it amounts to a politically retrograde abandonment of the broad, universalistic calls for justice made by Ambedkar, and second, that it is based upon an unrealistic expectation that non-Brahmins will set aside their prejudices and embrace Dalits within a common Tamil identity. Both criticisms bear upon the issue of translation. In the first, a Tamil-focused movement is assumed to be inward looking, centripetal, and inherently inimical to addressing all-India and global issues. Simply put, this criticism assumes an incompatibility between the turn to Tamil and translatability. The second criticism bears upon translation in the extended sense of a translation between words and deeds. For it accuses the movement of embracing a self-defeating strategy. And if the turn to Tamil is strategically self-defeating—if it weakens Dalits even within Tamil Nadu—of what relevance could the movement be to all-India politics or to the struggle of dominated subpopulations more generally? As I will explain, however, neither criticism rests on solid foundations.

[18] I proceed in reverse order, by beginning with the second criticism (which deems the embrace of Tamil identity a strategic dead-end). The assumption here is that the value of invoking a common, caste-free Tamil identity turns on whether non-Brahmins heed Dalits' call to

brotherhood. But this fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the VCK's predicament and its most pressing political imperative: stripping Dalit voters away from the Dravidian parties.[21] And in this the turn to Tamil has been an unqualified success. For until very recently, virtually all Dalits habitually gave their vote to either one or the other of the major Dravidian parties. It was not that Tamil Dalits maintained any kind of naïve faith that these parties in fact served their interests—on the contrary, Tamil Dalits know from personal experience the extent to which both Dravidian parties have continually sided with their oppressors—but that the DMK and AIADMK were, on one hand, the only game in town, and, on the other, espoused *ideals* (however much they might contradict them in practice) that ordinary Dalit voters strongly identified with. Not only that, but the Dravidian parties routinely dispensed 'gifts' to Dalit voters around election time.[22] Under these circumstances, ordinary Tamil Dalits could be at once wholly cynical about the actualities of Dravidian politics, and yet remain steadfastly loyal to one or the other party in their actual voting behavior (Roberts 2007).

[19] By claiming the mantle of 'Tamil,' the VCK appropriates for itself the Dravidian parties' greatest ideological advantages—namely, the progressive idealism that has long been associated, in Dravidian rhetoric, with Tamil-ness itself. In the historical context of modern Tamil Nadu, 'Tamil' refers not merely to a particular linguistic identity, but equally to the *universal* progressive values—anti-caste, feminist, pro-poor, democratic, and humanist—that Dravidian leaders, following the lead of early Dalit leader Iyothee Thass, sought to characterize as inherent to Tamil Nadu's authentic (pre-Aryan) culture. This appropriation of Tamil identity enables the VCK to claim the moral high ground vis-à-vis the Dravidian parties by calling upon them to live up to their own progressive rhetoric, while simultaneously depriving them of their most credible charge against the VCK (i.e. that it is a narrowly caste-based organization). The erosion of Dalit support, moreover, is of greater significance to Dravidian party dominance than simply the loss of their votes. For until recently Dalits were hired to carry banners and shout political slogans at Dravidian party rallies, and their attendance in large numbers at such functions were critical to Dravidian parties' ability to produce a visual spectacle of mass subaltern support. But today Dalits frequently refuse to play this role, attending their own rallies instead (*VT*: 111–2).

[20] Nevertheless, Dalits make up just under 20% of the population of Tamil Nadu, and in no constituencies do they comprise a majority of voters. Their political future therefore

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[21] I owe this analysis to Gajendran Ayyathurai, personal communication.

[22] Typically these would include such things as liquor for Dalit men, and cheap saris for women voters.

depends on their ability to form successful alliances with non-Dalits, and in the present day this means with either one or the other of the Dravidian parties. And the VCK's negotiating power in the arena of parliamentary politics depends directly on their ability to consolidate the Dalit vote.[23] Their strategy, in other words, appears to be to strip Dalit voters from both Dravidian parties, only to then return those voters to them via carefully crafted electoral alliances. There is of course nothing paradoxical about this; instead of the Dalit vote being split more or less evenly between, and without any voice within, the two Dravidian political machines, the VCK is potentially in a position to force these parties to compete for votes they had long taken for granted. Nor is the prospect of alliance with Dravidianists necessarily a bad thing so far as politically progressive Dalits are concerned, despite these parties' admittedly checkered record with respect to Dalit interests—so long as the Dravidian parties can be persuaded to uphold in practice the political values that they already theoretically endorse. By appropriating the Dravidian parties' own professed progressive and anti-caste ideology (under the heading of 'Tamil') and, moreover, by positioning itself as its vanguard, the VCK under Thirumavalavan's leadership may very well be able to have its cake and eat it too. For by challenging the Dravidian parties on these grounds, the VCK in one fell swoop stakes out an independent basis for Dalit power in the electoral arena, while nevertheless encouraging those parties to reform themselves and leaving open the door to cooperation.

[21] Thus the first criticism of the VCK's embrace of pro-Tamil ideology—viz. that it makes no sense politically—is questionable. There are perfectly good strategic reasons for the VCK to adopt this approach. Will it succeed? It is too early to say. But even as this review was being composed, news arrived that Thirumavalavan had been elected to India's Parliament in alliance with the DMK. The critical question now is whether the VCK will prove capable of influencing the DMK's policies towards Dalits, or whether, on the contrary, it will become so dependent on the DMK's political and financial support that it will effectively forfeit its critical voice.[24] Indeed, the rise of Dalit politics could very well prove a hidden blessing for Dravidian parties—for now, instead of purchasing the Dalit vote directly (i.e. by dispensing innumerable pre-

[23] That consolidation of the Dalit vote is *the key* political imperative for their party is explicitly recognized by VCK strategists (Collins 2009).

[24] Hugo Gorringe (2007) argues that this has already happened.

election 'gifts,' as mentioned above), they can woo ostensibly independent Dalit parties with lucrative coalition alliances, and then simply use these parties to canvass the Dalit vote.[25]

[22] What then of the other, and perhaps more damning, criticism of the turn to Tamil—that it implies an ethno-linguistic chauvinism and an abandonment of Ambedkarite universalism, or that being pro-Tamil entails being opposed to (or at least cut-off from) India's other linguistic identities, including from Dalits in neighboring states? The test of these claims resides in the actual uses to which 'Tamil' is put—in what the term in fact signifies in the context of VCK discourse.[26] Until now commentators who habitually accuse the VCK and Thirumavalavan of ethno-linguistic chauvinism have not based their claims on any textual evidence, but have relied instead on the biased reporting of mainstream Tamil and English periodicals and on select out-of-context quotation. And because his words have not been available heretofore in English, it has not been possible for interested persons elsewhere in India to question the validity of these assessments.

[23] Take the slogan '*Aṉaittu moḻikaḷaiyum kaṟpōm, aṉṉai Tamiḻai kāppōm!*' (*UH*: 121). The second part of this slogan translates as 'we will protect Mother Tamil!' and might very well seem to imply an inward-looking and defensive ethno-linguistic politics. Such an interpretation becomes more difficult, however, when we consider that equal weight is accorded to the preceding phrase: 'we will study all languages!' A party's slogans are not coined haphazardly or by accident, and in conjoining the protection of 'mother Tamil' to a proclamation that party members will study all languages the VCK is making a deliberate statement. Personifying Tamil as 'mother Tamil' is nothing new in Tamil Nadu, moreover, and has been in fact a mainstay of Dravidianist politics since the 1930s. But where the prior Tamil protection movement revolved precisely around the *refusal* to learn north Indian languages, Hindi especially, the VCK reverses this by flatly denying any incompatibility between loyalty to one's mother tongue and the embrace of all languages.

[24] Among the most frequently-cited examples of Thirumavalavan's alleged ethno-linguistic nationalism is the fact that he and most other members of his party have legally changed their names from 'foreign-influenced' (i.e. Sanskritic) ones, like Ramasamy, to 'pure

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[25] I would like to thank Michael Collins for alerting me to this possibility.

[26] Thirumavalavan himself denies any contradiction between his being pro-Tamil and his Ambedkarism (*UH*: 152, 171). But the mere fact that he says it does not make it so, and for this reason I shall devote several paragraphs to examining what 'Tamil' in fact means in the texts under review.

Tamil' names like Tolkappiyar. What, for Thirumavalavan and the VCK, is at stake? Examining his writings and speeches one does indeed find the rejected names referred to as 'foreign.' But in explaining his party's opposition to these names, the fact that they are foreign appears merely incidental. The reason 'foreign' names are rejected is not because they are foreign, but because such names are seen as linked to what Thirumavalan refers to as 'Hindutva'—a term he uses idiosyncratically to refer, not merely to the modern political movement that bears this name, but to brahminical Hinduism *tout court*, all forms of casteism, and to the violent suppression of religious minorities throughout Indian history, especially Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. Thus VCK members are also expected to give up names that identify them as members of any specific caste, even though in most cases these names are uniquely Tamil.[27]

[25] Another prominent example of Thirumavalavan's alleged ethno-linguistic nationalism is his vocal support of the LTTE. One should note that support for the LTTE's cause (if not their methods) is virtually universal in Tamil Nadu, although the leaders of the mainstream Dravidian parties tend to avoid the issue because to openly sympathize with the Tamil Tigers would risk alienating the Dravidian parties' allies in central government, especially Congress. Thus by openly championing the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils, Thirumavalavan simultaneously calls attention to what is popularly regarded as the hypocrisy of Dravidian leaders.[28] But while the Tigers are consistently described by Thirumavalavan as brave warriors fighting on behalf of an oppressed minority, does this mean he embraces Tamil ethno-linguistic nationalism as such? (Certainly even the LTTE's sworn enemies will not deny their bravery, and there is no doubt that Tamils are systematically discriminated against in Sri Lanka.) Reading Thirumavalavan's stance on Sri Lanka closely, we find that as much as he wishes for Tamils to be freed from the yoke of Sinhala dominance, he recognizes that caste divisions exist among Sri Lankan Tamils and openly proclaims that 'if you merely capture power from the Sinhalese it is not liberation,' and 'it will be useless if Hindutva [read: caste] remains' (*UH*: 151).[29]

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[27] It may appear paradoxical, therefore, that VCK members have also rejected Christian and Muslim names as well. Thirumavalavan's explanation for this policy is that *in India* these names have taken on caste connotations they do not possess elsewhere in the world—and indeed that, insofar as Indian Christians embrace caste, they too are part of what he calls 'Hindutva' (*UH*:133ff). Thirumavalavan has nevertheless consistently and prominently condemned anti-conversion legislation, and championed the inherent right of all Indians to convert to whatever religions they choose, especially so-called foreign religions like Christianity and Islam (Thirumavalavan 2002, *TAL*: 143–146, 153–156, 161, *UH*: 90–91, 103, 105ff, 120ff, 136ff, 154, 170, 179ff, 214, 234–8).

[28] This is not to imply Thirumavalavan's championing of the LTTE is motivated solely by political one-upmanship; his personal sympathies for the Tigers predate his involvement in Dalit politics by many years.

[29] Ravikumar also writes compellingly on the deep and unacceptable caste divisions among Sri Lankan Tamils in 'Caste of the Tigers' (*VT*: 59–75).

[26] Thirumavalavan could not be more clear on this point: 'We are not for a mere linguistic nationalism, *it has to be... a caste-annihilating nationalism*' (*UH*: 153, emphasis added). The 'nationalism' Thirumavalavan espouses is defined not (like most modern nationalisms) by ties of blood, but oppositionally—it is a *political* nationalism premised upon common interests in opposing caste. Indeed, one might even argue that a nationalism based on opposition to caste has to be opposed to the valorization of common birth—for caste is, if nothing else, a political-economic alliance premised on the ideology of common blood. And Thirumavalavan recognizes as much when he proclaims that opposing caste might very well mean opposing one's own family members: 'Tamilian unity lies in the opposition of Hindutva. In this opposition, one's own uncle, one's own brother-in-law might need to be opposed. One's siblings might need to be opposed' (*UH*: 153). Thus to return to the question of what Tamil means in Thirumavalavan's discourse, we find him elsewhere re-defining 'Tamil' as a casteless person; the only *true* Tamils, in other words, are the outcaste Dalits and those who have embraced their cause (*UH*: 179). At this point one begins to sense that, far from subordinating Ambedkarite politics to Tamil, what Thirumavalavan is really up to is refashioning Tamil nationalism as a form of Ambedkarism.

[27] At any rate, the contrast between Thirumavalavan's 'Tamil nationalism' and what has normally gone under this name is striking. Elsewhere, for instance, he condemns historical kingdoms standard Tamil nationalism hails as paragons of Tamil virtue—the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas—and champions the so-called Kalappira period, during which Tamil Nadu was ruled by non-Tamil kings, on the grounds that under their rule anti-caste Buddhism and Jainism flourished (*UH*: 131, 145). By championing in the name of 'Tamil nationalism' positions that standard Tamil nationalists regard as perverse, Thirumavalavan invents a completely new Tamil nationalism—one that does not define itself in opposition to foreign tongues. Just 'because Thirumavalavan speaks of Tamil,' he explains, 'does not mean that he is against Kannadigas, or that he is against the Kannada language. I [say] to them, 'You arrange a function to take [pure] Kannada names [i.e. which do not connote caste], and I shall take part in it'' (*UH*: 148).

[28] Another key feature of 'Tamil' in Thirumavalavan's discourse that mainstream commentators have consistently ignored is its class connotations. For in Tamil Nadu today even the leaders of the allegedly pro-Tamil Dravidian movement, while preaching the greatness of Tamil and the importance of Tamil-medium education, send their own children to be educated in English medium schools just like other elites. Purely Tamil-medium education, by contrast, has become the exclusive domain of Dalits and other very poor people. As we have seen, the VCK

has nothing against learning foreign languages; to 'study all languages' is not just a slogan, but one of the greatest aspirations of the VCK's poor cadres. To 'protect Tamil,' conversely, does not simply mean preserving the integrity of the Tamil language, nor even does it just mean protecting the casteless ideal that VCK discourse associates with the sign 'Tamil.' In addition to these meanings, to 'protect Tamil' is simultaneously to assert the dignity of those who have nothing else.

> Only the children of the cheris [i.e. Dalit ghettoes] are enrolled into the state-run corporation schools and learn Tamil. Even today, if someone speaks in Tamil, the co-students mock, 'Why do you speak like someone who has studied in a corporation school?'.... only the poor people living in the villages, particularly the Tamil Dalit people, and the people of the urban slums are the ones who are protecting Tamil.... The trend of mistreating and humiliating those who study in the state-run corporation schools and Tamil-medium schools is prevalent. (*UH*: 123, 129).

[29] The VCK's protest against script writing in which the lead characters of Tamil films pepper their speech with English phrases must be understood in this light. The point is not to oppose English as such, but to expose the celebration of an elite caste/class subjectivity in Tamil film that marginalizes Dalits and others who have been denied access to English education.[30]

[30] I have dwelt on Thirumavalavan's use of 'Tamil' because his pro-Tamil rhetoric has been a primary source of accusation against him. In so doing, I risk perpetuating the impression that most of his speeches and writings revolve around Tamil. This is not the case. While interpreting and commenting on the meanings and value of 'Tamil' are among his principal themes, readers whose only knowledge of Thirumavalavan comes from secondary sources will be surprised at the catholicity of his interests. In addition to caste, his speeches dwell at length on such issues as privatization (*TAL*: 85, 139–142, 169–173), poverty and class (*TAL*: 127ff, 175–78), America's 'Global "supercop"-ism,' racist attacks on Sikhs in the United States and the US embargo on Cuba (*TAL*: 19ff), and Indian law—especially the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Goondas Act (repressive measures widely criticized by civil rights organizations, and which Thirumavalavan characterizes as a continuation of police practices under the British) (*TAL*: 39–42, 51, 123–125; *UH*: 4, 18–19, 29, 80–81, 91). That Thirumavalavan should see these topics as not only within his natural purview, but matters of vital concern, comes as a surprise only to the extent that we have been taught to regard the Dalit movement as a sectional interest group

[30] On the basis of my own ethnographic fieldwork in a Dalit slum in northern Chennai, I can testify to a widespread and deeply held ambition to learn English among those who live there—an ambition that in no way detracts from their profound identification with, and love of, the Tamil language.

(Gajendran 1998, Guru 1998). Viewed through their own eyes, however, the concerns of Dalits are not merely universal in aspiration but indeed *already* universal, whatever others may have to say about them. The truly sectional interests, rather, are the national and sub-national forces in India that seek to confine and exclude them.[31]

[31] In reviewing the translated speeches and writings of Thirumavalavan I have been at pains to provide an accurate and sympathetic interpretation of his thought and often challenging message. This is the first duty of a reader to any text (Asad 1993). I have not attempted to assess the accuracy of his historical claims or of the sociological account his words imply, because Thirumavalavan does not write as a professional historian or sociologist. He is a politician, an organizer, a thinker, and an instigator. In concluding I would like to note a possible tension among these roles, a tension that turns on the gap between statements and other forms of action. For knowing what Thirumavalavan says, and what kind of vision he espouses, cannot tell us what he and his party will be able to do. Leaders of the Dravidian movement too once espoused radical ideas, and sometimes still do. Whether the VCK will attempt to make good on their radical message by fighting for real structural change—land reform, for example—or whether they will remain content with symbolic measures and adapt to the patronage-based politics of Dravidianism remains an open question.

[32] I conclude with a brief note on Meena Kandasamy's translations. An additional factor in the VCK's growing success among Dalit voters has been the party's ability to appropriate from the Dravidian parties not only the prestige of Tamil, but also—through the voice of Thirumavalavan himself—the genre of Tamil political oratory, at which the Dravidianists once reigned supreme (Bate 2009).[32] For in addition to everything else, Thirumavalavan is widely acclaimed as the greatest orator of his generation. Readers hoping for a sense of what it feels like to listen to one of Thirumavalavan's speeches, however, will come away disappointed. In part this is because much of the power of his oratory derives from delivery—a well-timed pause, an ironic twist conveyed by tone of voice—as well as from his ability to connect intimately with his audience by drawing upon his own minute understanding of a life-world that he and they share. These are aspects that no translator could hope to convey. Yet there are other aspects of his

[31] Thus if one examines the pages of *Putiya Kōṭāṙiki* or *Talit Muṟacu* (two prominent Tamil Dalit monthlies) one finds a similar range of concerns. The latter, for example, reports regularly on the condition of Palestinians, black South Africans, and is undertaking a serialized translation of Malcolm X.

[32] Although Dravidian leaders continue to give speeches in the elevated '*mēṭait tamiḻ*' style, today's speeches are a formulaic shadow of their former selves, according to Kandasamy (*UH*: xxii–xxiii).

speeches that do not depend on the form of their delivery or the specificity of context, and these might have been conveyed in English. But the translator, despite being a talented poet, has chosen to translate Thirumavalavan's words in a strictly literal mode on the basis of the theory that this is more faithful to the original.[33] The result is a technically precise, yet sometimes awkward, document that will be of great use to the scholar (particularly one with some access to Tamil) or to the committed student of Dalit politics, but may perhaps prove somewhat challenging for the casual inquirer. Adding to the volumes' value as both scholarly and political documents are an immense number of highly detailed footnotes, which make a significant contribution in and of themselves.[34] Apart from the sheer historical detail they provide, Kandasamy's notes contain numerous original insights. To give but one outstanding example, note three on page seven points out that the physical separation of the Tamil Dalit hamlet (*cēṟi*) from the caste village (*ūr*) is not merely a symbolic expression of caste hierarchy—as generations of anthropologists have described it—but is also of (non-symbolic) strategic value in rendering Dalits perpetually vulnerable to traditional forms of collective punishment by caste people: being positioned several hundred meters downwind, the huts of the *cēṟi* can be safely torched without endangering caste villagers' own dwellings.[35, 36]

[33] *Venomous Touch* is a collection of essays by Ravikumar, one of today's leading Tamil public intellectuals (and a Dalit).[37] These essays, most of which were published between 1992 and 2005, are even more wide-ranging than Thirumavalavan's. His chapters include literary

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[33] Kandasamy discusses her choice in a translator's note (*TAL*: xxvii–xxviii).

[34] In *TAL* these notes amount to a full page for every three pages of regular text, and in *UH*, one page for every two.

[35] Kandasamy claims specifically that in most parts of Tamil Nadu the *cēri* is positioned to the northeast of the village—and hence leeward of prevailing south-westerly winds (*TAL* 7 n.3). If she is correct about *cēris*' positioning relative to prevailing wind patterns, this only enhances the significance of her observation. But what is clear is that arson (and the threat of arson) upon the *cēri* is among the traditional techniques of caste domination, and that technique would not be available if *cēris* were not located a safe distance from the main village (as they in fact are). That Dalits were traditionally prohibited from constructing homes with tiled (read: flame resistant) roofs has similarly been interpreted by anthropologists in a purely symbolic register as being merely about the denial of prestige (though it is certainly that too). The point here is not that the positioning of *cēris* (or the sorts of roofing materials used) is without symbolic significance, but about the weakness of anthropological theories that seek a symbolic rationalization for cultural practices without considering how they might be rational from other, non-symbolic standpoints as well (Asad 1979). Additional discussion of the strategic dimensions of *cēri* placement can be found in Viswanath (2006).

[36] For a discussion of the prevailing anthropological opinion, according to which caste is first and foremost a *symbolic* (ritual) order, and only secondarily a political–economic one, see Roberts (2008).

[37] It is also worth mentioning that Ravikumar is, in addition to being an intellectual and an activist, also a Member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly and a prominent figure within the VCK, second only to Thirumavalavan himself. Not only that, he is the co-founder of Navayana, the young publishing house to which we owe Viswanathan's *Dalits in Dravidian Land* and many other fine books focusing on Dalit issues, including Anand Teltumbde's *Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter Crop* (also reviewed in SAMAJ).

analyses of modern Tamil fiction,[38] film criticism,[39] an investigative report on electoral violence,[40] a meditation on the death penalty,[41] an analysis of the relations among caste, land control and the state,[42] an historical comparison of Dalit and elite native publishing in the late 19th and early 20th century and the present day,[43] an illuminating account of the position of Dalits in Sri Lanka and within the LTTE,[44] a phenomenological investigation of the relations between work and leisure,[45] an essay on the perverse parallels between sport and politics in domestic Indian politics and in the rivalry between India and Pakistan,[46] another on the production of official knowledge of Dalits by both the state and by social science,[47] and several on the meanings of democracy in theory and in practice.[48] Ravikumar's theoretical influences are as diverse as the topics that engage him, and include Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, the high-caste Tamil writer Pudumai Pithan,[49] B. R. Ambedkar, Jacques Derrida, and the playwright Augusto Boal. I can only touch on a few of these here.

[34] In an essay entitled 'Boundaries of Dalit Narrative,' Ravikumar speaks to a central theme of this review: translation, in the extended sense of the relation between particular languages and universal claims. 'We are told,' Ravikumar writes, 'that the pygmy [i.e. small, parochial] dalit discourse must first become a Tamil national discourse, then an Indian national one, before it can aspire to universality' (*VT*: 140). The topical and theoretical range of Ravikumar's writing itself may be taken as rejecting a well-established division of intellectual labor that would confine Dalits to what is closest to them—a division which, in the world of commercial publishing, has resulted in a proliferation of Dalit autobiographies for non-Dalit consumption, while ceding questions of national and global interest to the professional theoreticians of India's (Anglophone) elite. But Ravikumar pursues diverse topics not simply in order to resist the idea

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[38] Chapters 23 and 24.
[39] Chapter 22.
[40] Chapter 28.
[41] Chapter 16.
[42] Chapter 2.
[43] Chapter 3.
[44] Chapter 5.
[45] Chapter 13.
[46] Chapter 10.
[47] Chapter 21.
[48] Chapters 18, 24, 28 and 32.
[49] Among writers sympathetic to the Dalit cause it has become standard practice to place the term 'high caste' in quotation marks—the point being to signal one's rejection of the claim that some people are really 'higher' than others. I do not follow this practice; caste is in its very essence a hierarchical system, and to speak of castes (as opposed to, say, ethnic groups) is to refer to entities that are *by definition* either higher or lower than others. Accurately specifying that position does not imply an endorsement of the ideological system on which it rests.

that Dalit discourse must necessarily be narrow; fundamentally, his intellectual restlessness is driven by a sense of existential struggle and the belief that knowledge may indeed prove a weapon in the hands of the oppressed. Thus underlining the essentially strategic dimension of Martin Luther King's famous maxim 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,' Ravikumar regards it as virtually a matter of survival that those 'who have been regarded as viruses and isolated from the social body,' would refuse to be confined by Tamil or Indian national concerns, but would instead find themselves driven 'to collect information about oppressed communities throughout the world' (*VT*: 140).[50] The flip side of King's maxim, therefore, is Ambedkar's statement 'I have no homeland'—which in the context of Ravikumar's writings comes to refer not merely to the fact that, as a Dalit, he is treated as a foreigner in his own land, but that in his struggle for justice he cannot afford to be confined by national boundaries (*VT*: 121).[51]

[35] Ravikumar's essays are not those of professional academic, as he himself warns readers, nor does he regard himself as 'serious literary critic' (*VT*: 145). They read instead like the notebooks—desperate, hopeful, and frequently brilliant—of a prisoner who, after already devouring every book in the prison library, has now turned his attention to empirical studies of the prison itself. And his eye for unnoticed details in events that will already be familiar to readers of the other volumes under review can produce startling effects. In describing the pre-mediated murder of six Dalits in Melavalavu, for instance, Ravikumar pauses to contemplate the exact manner and sequence in which they were killed: after hacking off the head of K. Murugesan the attackers held it above the mouth of the mortally wounded but still living K. Cellatthurai, forcing the latter to drink his friend's blood (*VT*: 179).[52] These details were omitted from mainstream media accounts of the event, in which it appeared as just another sad and virtually inexplicable case of violence against Dalits. Murugesan's only crime, so far as the standard reportage goes, was having defied the orders of the dominant Kallar community and run for the office of panchayat president. The effect of such reporting is to decontextualize rural caste politics to make it appear as if violence begins only with the elections themselves. Ravikumar's ironic commentary on this matter is worth quoting *in extenso*.

> Dalits in Melavalavu are not allowed to wear smart, ironed clothes. On festive occasions, they are required to serve the village as a whole, as well as individual

[50] Martin Luther King's maxim provides the epigraph for Ravikumar's 'Mystery of Justice' (*VT*: 178–183), an essay on the Melavalavu murders that I describe in the next paragraph.

[51] Ambedkar's 'I have no homeland' is quoted from Keer (1995: 166).

[52] The Melavalavu murders are also covered in *DDL*, chapters 11, 29 and 31, *TAL*, ch. 4, and in an extended translator's footnote to the first chapter of *UH*, pp. 14–17.

> Kallars, without any remuneration. They cannot use common village property or participate in public functions; they cannot even give money for holding village festivals. That was how things were before the murders shattered the 'peace' of the village. It was a place where life ran smoothly 'like the togetherness of mother and children without any discrimination' under the regime of the double-tumbler system, separate wells and segregated cremation grounds. All this 'harmony' is gone after the panchayat elections! (*VT*: 179)

[36] Ravikumar's approach is more often Benjaminian than anthropological—rather than persuading the reader by the sheer weight of accumulated of evidence, he seeks to illuminates the totality of a situation in a single well-chosen detail. But he shares entirely the anthropologist's belief that apparently peripheral persons and events may disclose insights of more global significance. Thus having outlined the above facts about the murders and the social world within which they took place, he notes that a series of delays by the police and justice system permitted many of the accused to roam free for over a year prior to the trial, intimidating witnesses. When key police personnel are from the same community as the murderers, Ravikumar asks, and virtually the whole of the apparatus of justice is in the hands of caste people, what message does this send to the victims' families?

[37] In this particular case in Melavalavu a measure of justice was, against all odds, eventually served.[53] In concluding his essay, Ravikumar lists the names of several other Dalits who had been killed in the vicinity of Melavalavu in preceding years, whose murders were never even brought to trial (*VT*: 183). 'The absolute victim,' Ravikumar elsewhere writes, quoting Jacques Derrida, 'is a victim who cannot even protest. One cannot even identify the victim as a victim. He or she is totally excluded...[and] annihilated by history' (*VT*: 238, Derrida 1995: 389). In naming these *other* victims Ravikumar attempts to write them into history, though he is quite aware that they will in all likelihood soon be forgotten once again, save by loved ones and those directly involved (*VT*: 181).

[38] 'Writing Tamil Dalits,' the subtitle of this review, refers to Ravikumar's endeavor—as well as that of Viswanathan, Thirumavalavan, and translators Kandasamy and Azhagarasan—to undo the structural violence that is the matrix of this forgetting. However, I could just as well have titled it 'Translating Tamil Dalits,' because every act of writing is an act of translation between contexts: from the act of murder to an act of writing, from a small Tamil magazine to an English language volume, from an Indian publishing house to an on-line review article. By way of this translational process, Ravikumar acts upon not only Melavalavu, but also upon Derrida and

[53] *DDL*, chapter 31 describes the verdict.

Boal and the many other 'foreign' thinkers like Michel Foucault and B. R. Ambedkar he enlists, and in so doing transforms. Thus neither the Derrida nor the Foucault who appear on the pages of Ravikumar's essays bear more than a passing resemblance to the ones I thought I knew—and for this very reason they have many new things to teach.

[39] I began this review with the thought that if the Tamil Dalit movement is to be of any wider significance it must be in some sense translatable. It must be capable of instigating new arguments and new ideas—ones with not only intellectual, but political and legal consequences—in contexts quite different than those if its origin. And it is my contention that these writers have amply demonstrated this potential.

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